NGO Governance and Management in China

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Edited by Reza Hasmath and Jennifer Y. J. Hsu
Endorsements

Grounded in deep engagement as well as expert knowledge of contemporary China, this outstanding collection deftly explains how and why NGOs have multiplied and evolved within the space created and mediated by the state. Of particular value is the book’s success in unpacking the complex political dynamics through which some organizations thrive and others struggle.

Professor Deborah Davis, Yale University, USA

This book on governing and managing NGOs in China is a useful contribution to current studies of NGOs in China. Particularly valuable are the diverse empirical case studies of specific types of state-NGO interaction, which lend texture and depth to the analysis. This will be an important read for students of China.

Professor Jude Howell, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

In spite of hostility on the part of the Chinese government, NGOs, domestic and international, have become part of the landscape in China, engaging in a wide range of activities, sometimes supporting and supplementing the state, and other times challenging it. The well-researched and compelling case studies in this book help us understand the richness and complexity of life in the associational private spaces in China that are too often overlooked.

Professor Thomas B. Gold, University of California, Berkeley, USA

This book reveals the diversity and complexity of the relationship between contemporary Chinese NGOs and the government, and looks into the future of civil society in China. For those who want to understand the China’s state-society relationship, this book is a must read.

Professor Guosheng Deng, Tsinghua University, China

The governance and management of NGOs in China is an important and rapidly evolving field. In this up-to-date, carefully researched, and theoretically innovative collection, the editors are to be congratulated in bringing together a wide-ranging set of scholarly contributions that reframe the field. This book will be indispensable to scholars and practitioners in the years to come.

Professor David Lewis, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK
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CHAPTER 1

1 Governing and managing NGOs in China
An introduction

Jennifer Y. J. Hsu and Reza Hasmath

The number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China has dramatically increased in the past two decades. The approximately 440,000 officially registered NGOs – alongside a greater number of unregistered ones – operate in a spectrum of activities, such as education, poverty alleviation, community development, the environment, and health, and offer a variety of services and support for, often, marginalized groups in Chinese society. In effect, the relatively recent proliferation of NGOs in China suggests the potential dawn of a turning point in China’s state–society relations.

There are two major reasons explaining the contemporary rise of NGOs in China: socio-economic and political. For the former, NGOs in China have a growing ability to: (1) satisfy the need for public goods, (2) pursue collective interests, and (3) enhance positive externalities while lowering negative externalities (see Xu 2008). At a more basic level, the numerical increase of NGOs mirrors the rising social challenges caused, in part, by economic liberalization – with problems ranging from environmental damages to unsafe foods becoming an everyday reality that NGOs have sought to address. For the latter explanation, NGOs have proliferated due to the wider political ‘space’ afforded them by the state (see Liu 2008; Yu and Zhou 2012). J. Hsu and Hasmath (2014) reinforce this idea by arguing that the Chinese state has moved away from a strategy of overt coercion (termed overt sanctioning) to manage social organizations, to one of tacit sanctioning, whereby the state creates and mediates the ‘space’ for NGOs to operate.

The consequences of the growing numerical presence of NGOs in China, coupled with an evolving political, economic, and social institutional environment in the nation, is acutely interesting. Scholarly attention in Chinese NGOs has moved from macro investigations into state–society engagement (see Pei 1998; Ma 2006; Hasmath and J. Hsu 2009; Lu 2009) into detailed ethnographic accounts of how NGOs operate, and their day-to-day functions. We are now witnessing substantial changes in the way a range of social issues are addressed and discussed in China, in part thanks to the tireless efforts of NGOs.

China’s civil society

Foremost, the growth of Chinese NGOs has facilitated analytical enquiries into the nature of China’s civil society and what this growth means for the Chinese state (see J. Hsu, 2014). At the crudest level, these enquiries, in sum, ponder
whether NGOs should be viewed as a proxy for the development of civil society. Disaggregated further, the study of the behaviour of NGOs in China offers valuable insight into their transformative capacity, both for society and to a lesser extent in China’s case, for systemic political change.

Nonetheless, it will be misadvised to view NGOs solely as agents of democratization in the context of China. While NGOs are not impotent of their transformative capacity, the capacity of NGOs in China to affect political change is much more muted. While NGOs can, and do, provide alternate space for citizen engagement, the fact that NGOs exist and operate within an evolving authoritarian political environment – one that is under the tacit and overt rule of the Communist Party of China (CPC) – the various constraints that besets NGOs facilitates different types of developments and relationships with the state.

Put differently, while NGOs are not synonymous for civil society, they do illuminate the potential for non-state stakeholders to advance the social agenda. As China continues its economic and social development, various issues have come to the fore as a result. NGOs and other civil society stakeholders have taken the opportunity to address these emerging issues, and are advocating on behalf of the marginalized to local and central authorities.

While the civil society debate by Chinese scholars in the late 1990s and early/mid-2000s focused on matters of whether a Western/European notion was applicable in an authoritarian context, later studies on Chinese civil society have sought to discuss the usage of other more appropriate terms, such as a ‘third sector’ (Ma 2006; Lu 2009). For Gao Bingzhong and Xia Xunxiang, the notion of civil society requires greater articulation in the context of China, and thus an analysis of the functions of NGOs indicates that Chinese NGOs have contributed to a system of societal values, emphasizing notions such as civility. Gao and Xia’s chapter argue that the term ‘social sector’ may be more apt in categorizing the rise of NGOs, rather than civil society. When conceptualized as part of a ‘social sector,’ NGOs (and other non-state stakeholders) are thus tasked with the responsibility of advancing Chinese society, for example, to be a leader in responding to key events like the Wenchuan earthquake.

Whether we conceptualize the rise of Chinese NGOs as a strengthening civil society sector or not, Shawn Shieh advances a multidimensional framework – one that goes beyond civil society or a corporatist framework (see Hsu and Hasmath 2013) – to capture the often contradictory dynamics at play in the development of Chinese NGOs. Shieh, in his chapter, suggests that a framework emphasizing ‘societalization,’ whereby NGOs participate in initiatives that rely on societal resources, is most apt at explaining the trends in the sector between 2008 and 2013. The Chinese state may have evolved over the last two decades as to how it engages with NGOs, as Shieh notes, from management to guidance, but the state remains a considerable factor in the development of NGOs.

**Strong state, weak society?**

The ‘Chinese state’ should be conceptualized in a myriad of different ways, from local to central. While the role of the central state in influencing NGO activities
has been commented upon extensively in the literature, this book will generally place the analytical framework at the local state level. Here, the local state structure is defined as “the organization of local government”; and local state practice is understood as “the way local governments implement central policy and make and implement their own policy in the absence of higher-level guidance” (Remick 2002: 399). The need to account for local discourses of the Chinese state is made more pertinent by China’s decentralization. Local states are expected to make a wide range of decisions, as well as take on increased responsibilities, including the delivery of social welfare provisions. For instance, the proceedings from the Thirteenth National Civil Affairs meeting in March 2012 illustrated the central state’s desire to encourage greater participation of social organizations in a range of activities, in tandem with the local state’s efforts to improve its social assistance system to low-income households. Thus, by privileging the local state in the analysis of the state–NGO relationship, one can uncover the different factors that shape the development of NGOs, and why some NGOs are more effective than others.

The necessity for a more nuanced framework for understanding state–NGO engagement will reflect the changing dynamics and subtleties of both actors. It may be easy to conclude that the state is strong, and society is weak. By design, Chinese NGOs are inseparable from the Chinese state, whether in a tacit or an overt manner, and as such, whether we choose to incorporate the state into our analysis or not is a moot point. The current system of registration and management of Chinese NGOs heavily involves the state, and it will inevitably say something about the nature of the Chinese state. Yet, the viewpoint unveils little in understanding the forces at work in shaping the engagement between state and NGOs. For example, labour NGOs in China may seek informal partnerships with local branches of mass organizations thus allowing the NGO a level of relative independence to conduct its work (Chan 2013).

Jennifer Y. J. Hsu in her chapter specifically examines the significance of the state in the development of NGOs. She offers a proposal to differentiate notions of the state – that is, the Chinese state should be viewed as comprising spaces and layers where the boundaries of the state are porous, and its flexibility means that it can permeate and co-opt spaces of NGOs. Pragmatically, the flexible boundaries of the state translate to mean that the state is expanding into areas occupied by NGOs, and whether through formal or informal means of engagement, spaces of the state expand or contract depending on its interactions with NGOs.

Similarly, Reza Hasmath and Jennifer Y. J. Hsu’s chapter further reinforces the notion of the importance of the local state. Although NGOs have demonstrated the ability and capacity to deliver resources to various social groups and advocate on their behalf, as noted by Jessica C. Teets and Marta Jagusztyn’s chapter, Hasmath and Hsu observe relatively low levels of collaboration between the local state and NGOs. Hasmath and Hsu examine strategies of engagement between local state and NGOs to comprehend this case. They note that NGOs have not matured sufficiently to become part of an epistemic community in which their expertise or interpretive powers can be used as reference points by the state. This in turn explains low levels of collaboration between the local state and NGO. The focus
on knowledge and expertise provides a further avenue to assess state–NGO development. Recent literature indicates that the state will vary its engagement with NGOs depending on the type of organization, for example, the social services or goods they offer (Kang and Han 2011; Wu and Chan 2012).

The evolving political institutional environment in China, one that has varied from strict management to more guidance in recent years, shapes the NGO sector. The institutional environment is plagued by various isomorphic pressures affecting the way NGOs develop, where coercive and mimetic pressures have impacted on the form and functions of NGOs (see the Hasmath and Hsu chapter in this volume). In a recent survey by the China Development Brief (2013), 18 per cent of the NGOs surveyed had an annual budget of approximately US$16,000 to $81,500, and another 17 per cent with budgets ranging from $81,500 to $163,000. The findings of the survey indicate that the scale of NGO operations ranges from small to modest. The registration difficulties and access to stable domestic and international funding suggests that NGOs, and their ability to achieve their organizational goals, are likely to be shaped by the evolving political environment in China.

NGOs as social service providers

Simultaneously, both central and some local authorities in China are actively experimenting with the delivery of social services, including contracting such services out to NGOs. In a case study of two different outsourcing models, HIV service contracting in Yunnan and migrant children education in Shanghai, Teets and Jagusztyn show that social service outsourcing has the potential to impact state–NGO relations. Indeed, Shenzhen, Guangdong, Beijing, and Nanjing have all eased registration requirements for NGOs conducting social service delivery. While outsourcing may present itself as an indicator of future administrative reforms in China, Teets and Jagustzyn’s chapter clearly notes that the feedback mechanisms to inform policy require critical attention if the infrastructure to strengthen the participation of NGOs is desired. Although outsourcing may lead to greater interaction between state and NGOs, among the potential pitfalls in moving towards a market-based model without the necessary standards or monitoring mechanism is the failure to understand and adhere to accountability measures and ensure the quality of the services delivered (Fisher et al. 2012). Another question that outsourcing raises is whether a market-based model of service delivery will lead to a homogenization of the sector – due to the isomorphic pressures noted by Hasmath and Hsu’s chapter – as NGOs compete for limited resources and contracts.

As NGOs serve to deliver more services to a greater proportion of the population, NGOs will inevitably become stronger mediators between state and society. How NGOs perform in such a role is again dependent on how they function as service providers. Whether greater NGO penetration into communities as service providers will lead to higher trust levels of NGOs is open to question. Christopher Heurlin writes in his chapter that the public trust level of NGOs is dependent on their relationship with the state. His study details that ties between NGOs and local authorities facilitate trust in NGOs by making citizens who trust the local
authorities much more likely to trust NGOs. However, during the Hu Jintao era, trust in local authorities and NGOs declined significantly. Heurlin shows that the declining sociopolitical environment negatively affected trust levels for NGOs. Given such a situation, it begs the question whether NGOs can be effective mediators between state and society.

Perhaps major events such as the Wenchuan earthquake, where NGOs have illustrated decisive action in providing humanitarian aid, can reinvigorate public trust in NGOs. The earthquake not only showed the capacity of NGOs to respond quickly and effectively, but it also led to wider space for NGOs to emerge (Deng and Shieh 2011). Under such circumstances and changing institutional environment, we see NGOs adapt and develop new strategies for organizational survival. Though Heurlin’s chapter may offer a bleak prognostication of the future of Chinese NGOs, whereby there is a trust deficit in NGOs, Timothy Hildebrandt demonstrates that NGOs in China have a capacity to quickly evolve, factoring in their environment constraints.

**Models of funding**

The declining availability of international funding and the move towards an outsourcing model have created conditions in which NGOs must find new models of funding. Hildebrandt contends in his chapter that as the government becomes more adept at addressing social welfare issues, for example, in contracting out these services to non-profits and NGOs, existing NGOs must find new organizational goals, as well as finances. Hildebrandt offers a distinctive outlook on the future of Chinese NGOs from the perspective of social entrepreneurship. Hildebrandt argues that NGOs are now more likely to shift from principled orientations to economics in their funding models. In this context, NGOs are being led by social entrepreneurs, where entrepreneurial business strategies are utilized to create and maintain a funding stream. In considering this turn, Hildebrandt adopts a political economy approach to theorize the evolution of NGOs, but as he observes with clarity, the social enterprise route holds both promise and peril for the organizations involved.

**Survival strategies**

While Chinese NGOs may not offer the large-scale political change that we may hope for, the likes of environmental NGOs can offer citizens the means to “practice political skills, organize and participate in civic action, and test political limits” (Yang 2005, 65). Or in the case of migrant NGOs, Ren (2011) argues that these NGOs are challenging the urban citizen regime. Moreover, migrant NGOs have engaged in raising labour rights amongst migrant workers and have moved to foster a sense of collective identity. HIV/AIDS’ NGOs have been active in reshaping the discourse on how people living with HIV/AIDS are viewed and treated (Wan et al. 2009). Thus, different sectoral developments across China’s NGO landscapes suggest that NGOs have the transformative potential. Nonetheless,
as Hildebrandt identifies, the various forces at work, domestic and international, suggest that the majority of NGOs, no matter the sector, will eventually have to address the question of organizational survival.

Strategies adopted by NGOs in response to their own survival emerge from external conditions and from the institutional experiences of its own members. Carolyn L. Hsu in her chapter articulates an organizational framework to interpret and analyze the evolution and adaptive strategies of NGOs. In her case study of the China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF), Carolyn L. Hsu shows that organizations such as the CYDF have successfully manipulated their status as government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) to assist in NGO development, tackle a social problem, and establish enough momentum within society to affect social change with regard to rural children’s education. Organizations such as the CYDF are not passive entities waiting for instructions from the state or reactive to their institutional environments. As Carolyn L. Hsu’s case study shows, the CYDF has managed to create a template for how to manipulate the disagreements and anxieties within the Chinese Party-state in order to achieve social and organizational goals. Hsu highlights the CYDF’s innovativeness in terms of organizational development and expansion.

Although the CYDF has demonstrated potential to be one step ahead of the Party-state in terms of its development and survival, Patricia M. Thornton’s chapter indicates that the Chinese Communist Party is actively reasserting its control over NGOs. Thornton’s chapter documents new Party developments in creating a Party-led Chinese “people’s society.” Such innovations include the establishment of a Party committee or branch inside the NGO. Responding to central leadership to be socially innovative, provincial and municipal Party committees have sought to establish and register new social organizations, in what Thornton refers as PONGOs, or Party-organized NGOs, which are a new organizational hybrid to support the formation of grassroots social groups. These PONGOs, unlike NGOs, are reliant on the local Party committees for sponsorship and registration. In considering Carolyn L. Hsu’s and Patricia M. Thornton’s chapters, we may reach the conclusion that these are contradictory developments. How then do we best understand these contrasting developments, where the activeness of social organizations may be tempered or quashed by a strengthening Party? We believe the developments presented clearly show the heterogeneity of social organizational development across China today, whether it be NGOs, GONGOs, or PONGOs. As we have sought to establish, there are varying levels of development and experimentations at both the state and NGO levels. There is no single model of a Chinese NGO, nor is there a unitary Chinese state. Consequently, we will see different types of NGO developments, with local states responding differently across respective jurisdictions.

The chapters ahead

The aim of this book is to bring together the most recent research covering three broad themes, namely the conceptualizations and subsequent functions of NGOs;
state–NGO engagement; and NGOs as mediators between state and society. It is clear that the results of the research do not always coincide with one another, but this only enhances the heterogeneity of the NGO sector and diverse sets of vertical and horizontal relationships. Despite the strength of the state and reassertion of the Party, the book demonstrates that there is substantial room for NGOs to navigate, adapt, and establish new types of relationships with the state.

Meanwhile, NGOs for the most part continue to mediate between state and society, whether as government contractors or as social enterprises. NGOs have the space and opportunity – albeit limited on both fronts – to explore new ways and hone their skills in mitigating China’s persistent and emergent social problems. The success in resolving these issues will also depend on how well central and local authorities respond to the presence and innovations of NGOs. Thus, this book should be viewed as a continuing story of state–society relations in contemporary China.

The first three chapters (Jennifer Y. J. Hsu, Gao and Xia, and Shieh) track the emergence and evolution of NGOs in contemporary China, and explore the nature and type of interactions between the local state and NGOs. In particular, Jennifer Y. J. Hsu’s chapter frames the discussion on state–NGO relations by arguing the need to understand how local states impact the development of NGOs. Gao and Xia’s chapter complements J. Hsu’s approach, by considering the NGO sector within a broader framework of civil society. Their chapter highlights the utility of the civil society concept in China, and its application in understanding local state and NGO interactions. Shieh’s chapter looks at state–NGO relations through a modal analysis of trends in the NGO sector. He takes aim at concepts such as corporatism and civil society, and purports that they do not offer a full understanding of the diversity of state–NGO interactions in China. In sum, this section provides a theoretical framework for subsequent discussions throughout the book.

The next set of chapters (Teets and Jagusztyn, and Heurlin) consider not only the current role of Chinese NGOs at the local level, but how perceptions and expectations of NGOs are changing domestically. Teets and Jagusztyn’s chapter suggest a divergent perspective, by discussing a new collaborative model of governing NGOs – one that incorporates the recent move towards local state outsourcing of social service delivery to NGOs. Heurlin invites us to pause and consider the development of the NGO sector from a trust perspective. He strongly suggests that the general public has a significant role to play in determining the function and legitimacy of the modern NGO.

Finally, the last chapters (Hasmath and Jennifer Y. J. Hsu, Hildebrandt, Thornton, and Carolyn L. Hsu) contemplate different possibilities and futures for NGOs in China. Hasmath and Jennifer Y. J. Hsu present a novel conceptual framework that explains a lack of local state and NGO engagements. Hildebrandt’s chapter provides an insight into what occurs once NGOs have achieved their aims. Thornton and Carolyn L. Hsu chapters illustrate the involvement of PONGOs and GONGOs, respectively. Both chapters ponder the future activities of PONGOs and GONGOs in the local state and their impact on the development of NGOs.
As China becomes increasingly integrated into the global system, the pressure to acknowledge and engage with NGOs will rise. Unless there is a clear understanding of state authorities’ interaction with NGOs, and vice versa, any analysis of China as a global, social, political, and economic force will be incomplete. Put differently, this book will provide an urgent insight into how state authorities are currently interacting with NGOs, allowing for the codification and cataloguing of such interactions to ensure a measure of predictability in our assessment of China’s state–NGO relations. Moreover, this book will provide a future glimpse into the practices and challenges of NGO and state interactions in China’s rapidly developing regions, which will aid in NGOs’ strategic planning in the short/long term and help us better understand Chinese NGOs’ behaviour when they eventually move their areas of operation from the domestic sphere to an international one.
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